

**Young British Partisan Attitudes to Negative Election Campaign Advertising: A Tri-Party Perspective. Journal of Political Marketing. DOI: 10.1080/15377857.2014.959687**

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**Abstract**

This article presents an empirical investigation of young partisan first-time voter attitudes towards the use of negative attack advertising in a British general election. Partisanship, particularly in relation to negative advertising and third-party effects is significantly under-researched, yet it advances understanding of youth electoral interaction. Our study confirms that young British partisans are not passive recipients of information, but are actively involved in information processing, interpretation and counter arguing. Our findings also highlight a third party effect among young partisans in their evaluation of the attack advertising. Overall our young partisans broadly reject image-attack election ads, which raises a ‘health-warning’ on its use in future election campaigning. The findings of this study are of significant interest to election campaign strategists in their planning for future elections and to political researchers striving to advance understanding within the field of political marketing.

Keywords: British elections, motivated reasoning, negative attack advertising, partisanship, tri-party attitudes, youth electoral engagement

## INTRODUCTION

In an important paper within the *Journal of Political Marketing* Henneberg (2008) reviews the research on political marketing and observes that "... a certain stagnation in knowledge development has been identified" (p.151). He goes on to suggest the need for new directions in the development of research in political marketing with "less restricted conceptual horizons" (p.152). In particular we would like to note two of Henneberg's specific observations that motivated a further examination of our empirical data collected during the 2005 British General Election. Firstly, the need to better understand "... the impact of negative political advertising on voter decision-making processes, which may challenge the need for tighter guidelines." (p.160). Secondly, the observation that "Analytical and empirical studies utilizing higher-level qualitative or quantitative methods ... are still extremely rare." (p.165).

Thus, in response to Henneberg (2008), the purpose of this paper is to explore young first-time partisan voters' attitudes towards the negative image and issue-attack advertising used during the 2005 British General Election. This exploration is based on personal-interview questionnaires conducted with 627 partisans concerning their attitudes towards actual attack ads used in the election. Two main parties contested the election, Labour and Conservative. Importantly a third party, the Liberal Democrats (LibDem), are also considered, as they usually poll a significant proportion of the overall votes, but without gaining similar benefit in terms of representation.

Whilst there is an extensive literature on negative political campaign advertising, there is no consensus on how effective or detrimental negative campaigning actually is in aiding the electorate's message reasoning (Lau, Sigelman, and Rovner 2007). Additionally, while party identification is a well-established research construct in the political-behavioural literature, it has not been extensively examined within the political-advertising field (Chang 2003). Indeed there is a paucity of evidence relating to the impact of negative advertising on British partisans, which this paper sets out to address. Furthermore, while there is evidence that young people in western societies possess negative attitudes towards parliamentary politics, and are disengaged from it (see for example Henn and Weinstein

2006; Huggins 2001; Kaid et al. 2007), there is very limited understanding of young partisans who are politically engaged. Thus this paper responds to Hennberg's call for empirically well-grounded research that examines negative attack advertising from the innovative conceptual horizon of party-identification – partisanship – within a challenging electoral segment – British youth. In so doing, it aims to contribute to the development of knowledge within the domain of political marketing. This paper begins by presenting an overview of the research context – the 2005 British General Election and youth political engagement. This is followed by a review of previous academic research on negative advertising, with emphasis given to its impact on partisan voters. Following an account of the methodology, the results of the research investigation are presented. These are discussed within the framework of negative attack advertising and 'motivated reasoning' within partisanship. Finally conclusions, further research and implications for campaign strategists are proffered.

## **THE RESEARCH CONTEXT**

The research was conducted during the 2005 British general election advertising campaign. The uniqueness of each election contributes to a specific style and tone in each of the contesting parties election campaigns. In 2005, whilst the British economy was perceived as strong, more widely the election battle context was 9:11, the 'war on terror', the Iraq conflict and its impact on the trustworthiness of the Prime Minister, Tony Blair. Indeed, as Dermody and Hanmer-Lloyd (2005, p. 1022) observe, "Trust, or the lack of it, had become an agenda item for the three main parties – Conservatives, Labour and the Liberal Democrats". Political commentators noted that this trust issue was the underlying theme of the whole 2005 party conference season (Rawnsley 2004). Such distrusting attitudes had also been present in the 2001 British general election and some argued that this had contributed to a low election turnout rate of 59.4% (Bromley and Curtice 2002; Dermody and Scullion 2003; Russell et al. 2002). In 2005 the election turnout increased to just 61%, but significantly, for this paper, young 18-24 year old voters had a turnout of only 37% (Mori 2005). In terms of the advertising campaigns, the Conservatives (main challenger party) focused on attacking

Labour on five issues: taxes (lower and value for money), immigration, crime (more police), education (school discipline) and the National Health Service (NHS) (cleaner hospitals). Although key to their advertising strategy, especially as the election grew near, was the use of image-attack advertising aimed at the Prime Minister, Tony Blair, particularly his 'lies' over Iraq.

The Labour (incumbent) party strategy recognised that their economic performance was a strong weapon, and hence valuable ammunition against their main opposition, the Conservative party. They chose to use a 'Forward not backward' theme contrasting their successful economic policies with previous Conservative failures. Thus, issue-attack advertising became the central theme of the Labour strategy to create anxiety amongst voters that things would be very much worse under the Conservatives. For example, Labour claimed that the Conservatives would bring in charges for hospital operations. Voters were invited to decide who they trusted the most to deliver on key policies. Thus, both the Conservative and Labour advertising campaigns were essentially attacking in tone, using both image and issue-attack ads.

The LibDem party attempted to be much more positive in their advertising. Whilst they did use comparative ads to identify issue differences, their focus was on presenting their Leader, Charles Kennedy, and their party as a real alternative to both the Conservatives and Labour. With key themes of 'freedom, fairness and trust (through honesty)' as their core values, they presented the electorate with '10 good reasons to vote Liberal Democrat'. Thus, in contrast to Labour and the Conservatives, their approach was based on positive reasons to vote LibDem.

Overall, while the campaigns aimed to mobilise each party's partisans and to appeal to floating voters, the underlying message takeout from these three ad campaigns appeared to be whom should the electorate distrust the least as opposed to whom should they trust the most? (Dermody and Hanmer-Lloyd 2005). Indeed trust-building was not really evident in the Labour or Conservative advertising campaigns.

Set against this election backdrop, as a primary disengaged segment (supported by their voting behaviour), there was also disquiet on whether young adults would vote or not. Thus young British

adults are of primary interest in our research investigations because of their significantly lower turnout (compared with older segments), and the ensuing challenge of engaging them. Their persistently lower turnout is symbolic of a broader epidemic of youth electoral disengagement as young adults in the West decline to vote in elections. In Britain, Henn and Weinstein (2006, p. 518) note that “young people are becoming increasingly disconnected from the political process.” Indeed evidence shows that they are less likely to be politically engaged than older segments of the population (Abrial, Cautrès, and Mandran 2003; Anderson and Goodyear-Grant 2008; Zukin et al. 2006). The evidence for this youth ‘malaise’ is extensive and a full account of it is beyond the remit of this article. Prior accounts from the authors, documenting these studies, can be found in Dermody et al (2013). In summary these studies indicate that young people are politically disengaged because their trust in parties and politicians is low, they possess high levels of political cynicism and scepticism, their knowledge and comprehension is limited, they feel politically isolated and alienated, and they perceive parliamentary/presidential politics to be irrelevant to their everyday lives (for example see Abrial, Cautrès, and Mandran 2003; Anderson and Goodyear-Grant 2008; Bromley and Curtice 2002; Delli Carpini 2000; Feldmann-Wojtachnia et al. 2010; Huggins 2001; Kaid, McKinney, and Tedesco 2004; Pintor and Gratschew 2002; Zukin et al. 2006). Thus, not only do young people perceive the political process and those who govern it to be remote and inaccessible, which leads to a feeling of low political efficacy and increased alienation, they are also highly distrustful and critical of those politicians who vie for control of it. Consequently, as Fieldhouse, Tranmer and Russell (2007) observe, today’s youth appear to hold deeply skeptical views of the mainstream political parties and elected politicians – and of the way that they conduct their activities. This concurs with the views of Nye, Zelikow and King (1997) a decade previously, who found that young electors were the most likely to distrust government and political institutions.

There is a wealth of evidence explaining why young adults do not vote; however explanations of why some do engage is much more limited (Dermody, Hanmer-Lloyd, and Scullion 2010; Fieldhouse, Tranmer, and Russell 2007; Pleyers 2005; Russell et al. 2002; White, Bruce, and Ritchie

2000). Accordingly, this paper makes a contribution to understanding this minority group of young voters – particularly as 'brand loyal' partisans – within the context of their attitudes towards negative election advertising.

## **NEGATIVE ELECTION CAMPAIGN ADVERTISING**

This analysis of the literature begins with an explanation of negative political advertising, and most importantly the distinction between negative issue and image-attack advertising used in election campaigning. This distinction has been largely ignored within the scholarship on negative political advertising (Dermody and Scullion 2003; Jamieson 1992), contributing to some of the perceived contradictions in its evidential base. Negative advertising can be classified as comparative or attacking (Jamieson 1992). Comparative ads are more cognitively engaging, whilst attack advertising is more emotional and malicious (Dermody and Scullion 2003). Indirect comparative advertising is the least negative, where one/two sided arguments are presented to the electorate to evaluate as part of their decision-making. In contrast, attack advertising is more personalised, with image-attack ads that attack the personal character of competing candidates being the strongest form of negative advertising. Issue-attack ads criticise the policies of competing parties, and thus fall within the realms of emotive-cognitive arguments (Dermody and Scullion 2003). Generally comparative and issue-attack negative political ads are judged to be acceptable by the electorate. However, image-attack ads are deemed less acceptable because of their deliberate intention to denigrate or destroy the reputation of competing candidates (Brooks 2006; Dermody et al. 2013; Kates 1998; Meirick 2002; Pinkleton, Vm, and Austin 2002; Robideaux 1998, 2002, 2004; Stevens et al. 2008). For example Stevens et al. (2008, p. 531) state that “issue-based criticism [was] appraised as much fairer than criticism about a candidate’s personal life.” Kates (1998, p. 1879) concurs and states research shows “attacks upon personal characteristics was judged by the participants as unacceptable, unethical and unfair play”. Brooks (2006) maintains this is not surprising as the premises upon which these attacks are made are fundamentally different. Thus, evidence indicates that issue-attack ads that criticise policy are

perceived differently and deemed more of an acceptable part of electioneering. In contrast image-attack ads that aim to diminish the good character and reputation of candidates are deemed as unacceptable, and, according to Pinkleton et al (2002), perceived to be of limited value to the electorate. Two examples of image and issue-attack ads from the 2005 British election can be found in appendices one and two. The Conservative party sponsored image-attack ad (Appendix 1) shows Tony Blair being accused of lying to take Britain to war. The Labour-sponsored issue-attack ad (Appendix 2), asks the public to vote for a free and fair NHS or suffer Conservative NHS charges. A fuller account of these ads can be found in the methodology.

It has been suggested that there are specific electoral conditions that trigger the utilisation of comparative and attacking negative election messages. According to Lau and Pomper (2001, 2004), and with reference to the 2005 election: (1) where candidates are behind –the Conservatives were both behind and more negative; (2) candidates in close elections – Labour’s perceived closeness due to the detrimental reputational impact of Prime Minister Blair taking the country to war; (3) challengers – the Conservatives viewed themselves as the challengers; (4) candidates with limited campaign resources – Labour had fewer resources than the Conservatives; (5) Republicans (Conservatives) are typically more negative – illustrated by the attack ads used in the Conservative campaign; (6) in response to opponent attacks, both Labour and the Conservatives attacked each other, although the Conservatives were more negative.

With respect to the effects of negative advertising, the evidence is highly controversial, partially because of ethical considerations surrounding the use of image-attack ads and partially because of the lack of separation between the more cognitive comparative and more emotive attack negative political advertising. Thus, while political consultants stress that negative political advertising 'works', and critics argue it demobilises, the evidence in both camps is inconclusive. This evidence will now be presented.

Negative political advertising is deemed to ‘work’ primarily through its cognitive effects. Thus studies suggest it is more memorable (Brader 2005; Brians and Wattenberg 1996), and increases

message attention and comprehension (Brader 2005; Brians and Wattenberg 1996; Niven 2006), compared with positive ad messages. Although, as Lau et al (2007) observe, these differences are neither strong nor consistent. In parallel to these cognitive effects, investigations reveal it aids decision-making (Dermody and Scullion 2003; Fazio and Williams 1986; Pinkleton 1997), partially by reducing risk (Dermody and Scullion 2003), and more strongly affects attitude-formation compared with other types of ads – and thus influences political choice behaviour (Shapiro and Rieger 1992; Tybout, Calder, and Sternthal 1981). Consequently these studies suggest that negative advertising can have a mobilising effect (Finkel and Geer 1998; Freedman and Goldstein 1999; Lau, Sigelman, and Rovner 2007; Martin 2004).

In contrast, critics of negative advertising in election campaigning argue it demobilises voter turnout because it devalues political argument, undermines political reputation and increases public cynicism, distrust and a sense of political alienation (see for example Ansolabehere and Iyengar 1995; Ansolabehere, Iyengar, and Simon 1999; Ansolabehere et al. 1994; Cappella and Jamieson 1997; Dermody and Scullion 2003; Kahn and Kenney 1999; Schenck-Hamlin, Procter, and Rumsey 2000). It therefore negates any potential positive cognitive effects, particularly when attack advertising is used (Dermody et al. 2013).

Summing up this complex and inconsistent evidence, it becomes clear that besides the lack of methodological clarity in the type of negative advertising being investigated, the effects of negative advertising are influenced by a number of factors including: variable effects of negative advertising (e.g. comparable vs. issue-attack vs. image-attack ads), types of (non)voter segment (e.g. young vs. old, partisans vs. undecided, voters vs. non-voters), and the electoral context itself. Hence, Lau et al (2007, p. 1183), in their meta-analysis, observe “there is an overriding lack of evidence that negative campaigning itself works as it is supposed to.” For example in terms of backfire on the attacker, the balance of literature suggests that attacking is not an effective way to boost one’s own image in comparison to the opponent. This may be particularly so in close election contexts where there is little distinction between opposing candidates, since as Carraro, Gawronski and Castelli (2010) observe,



attack ads, particularly personal image-attacks, undermine the effective communication of positive differences between candidates.

Given this complexity, in this article we narrow our focus to partisans' response to the use of negative advertising. Researchers in political behaviour have identified party identification as an important explanatory factor; however it has received little research interest within political-advertising research (Chang 2003). Studies clearly show that voters' party orientations have influenced their processing of campaign information, including debates (Bothwell and Brigham 1983) and campaign ads (Ansolabehere and Iyengar 1995). In 1960, the authors of *The American Voter* emphasised "the role of enduring partisan commitment in shaping attitudes toward political objects" (Campbell et al. 1960, p. 135). In the 1980 Reagan-Carter debate, Bothwell and Brigham (1983) found that judgements of who won the debate were biased in a way that was consistent with viewers' party orientations. Later on Bartels (2002, p. 138) concluded "that partisanship is not merely a running tally of political assessments, but a pervasive dynamic force shaping citizens' perspectives of, and reactions to, the political world".

The foundations of partisanship reside within the selective-processing literature; where processing bias is a function of message perceivers existing attitudes as individuals seek to maintain their cognitive consistency (An 2002; Frey 1986; Sweeney and Gruber 1984). Partisans therefore respond differently to the respective party advertising messages (Kaid 1997; Kaid and Tedesco 1999) as their existing attitudinal preferences bias their responses to political-advertising messages (Chang 2003). An (2002) showed similar results when considering political advertising, which suggests that partisans are not fair-minded in their interpretation of political communications. Chang (2003, p. 64), whose research was carried out in Taiwan, supported other western research and concluded that "... voters respond to ad information in a selective way, such that it reinforces their existing preferences". This is in line with Duck, Terry, and Hogg (1998) and Elder, Douglas, and Sutton (2006), who note that group membership or social identity plays a significant factor in affecting partisans' responses to persuasive messages and media campaigns. This self-perceived membership aspect of party

identification can be conceptualized under the social identity theory defined by Tajfel (1978, p. 63) as "...part of an individual's self-concept which derives from his knowledge of his membership of a social group (or groups) together with the value and emotional significance attached to that membership." In other words, social identity leads to a 'sense of belonging' to a social group by stressing points of similarities to members of their own social group (in-group) and differences to others (out-group) (Turner 1999). Consequently, partisans might show favouritism towards in-group members (i.e. their own political party) and perceive greater differences to out-group members (i.e. the oppositional party) than actually exist (Greene 2004; Kelly 1988).

Goren (2002) explored partisanship and character weakness in Presidential elections and suggested that, similar to previous research, partisans would, via 'motivated reasoning', have a desire to reach particular conclusions, which biases their information reasoning in a manner consistent with latent directional goals (Baumeister and Newman 1994; Fischle 2000; Klein and Kunda 1992; Kunda 1990; Lodge and Taber 2000; Pyszczynski and Greenberg 1987). He goes on to quote Pyszczynski and Greenberg (1987, p. 302) who explain that people who are motivated to arrive at a particular conclusion about something (such as partisans) cannot believe whatever they want to about it because there are pressures to maintain "an illusion of objectivity". Thus, partisans have a strong motivation bias towards how they gather, evaluate and integrate information to make a summary judgement about, for example, an electoral attack ad (Baumeister and Newman 1994; Fischle 2000; Klein and Kunda 1992; Kunda 1990; Stoker 1993). Vallone, Ross and Lepper (1985) refer to a hostile media bias in which in-group members tend to view any media coverage attacking their own party as unfairly biased against, and hostile towards their own side. Goren (2002, p. 639) concludes "... partisans are motivated to generate negative evaluations of opposition party candidates and look for cues that enable them to do so in a seemingly rational and objective manner". This concurs with other research that supports the biasing nature of party identification in interpreting political advertising. Thus, when considering the Conservative and Labour partisans' response to the attack advertising carried out by their respective parties, we hypothesize:

**H1:** *Conservative partisans have significantly more positive attitudes towards the ad attacking the Labour Leader than the Labour partisans.*

**H2:** *Labour partisans have significantly more positive attitudes towards the ad attacking the Conservative health issue than the Conservative partisans.*

Similarly, as the third party voters in the election, the LibDems, may not share the attitudes of the two main parties in relation to the ads presented, two further hypotheses are tentatively proposed:

**H3:** *Conservative partisans have significantly more positive attitudes towards the ad attacking the Labour leader than the LibDem partisans.*

**H4:** *Labour partisans have significantly more positive attitudes towards the ad attacking the Conservative policy issue than the LibDem partisans.*

Taber and Lodge (2006), in line with other authors, explore partisanship through their theory of affect-driven ‘motivated reasoning’, with its three mechanisms of partisan or biased reasoning. Firstly, prior attitude effect suggests that where people feel strongly (e.g. partisan voters), they will evaluate supportive arguments much more strongly than opposing arguments. Secondly, disconfirmation bias, where people will spend more time and cognitive resources denigrating and counter-arguing attitudinally incongruent arguments compared with congruent ones. Thirdly, confirmation bias, whereon when people are free to choose, they will seek out confirming rather than disconfirming arguments. They also note that people are often largely unaware of the strength of their prior attitudes and will feel they are trying hard to be fair-minded and objective; even though in reality this is an illusion (Pyszczynski and Greenberg 1987). Thus, ad messages aiming to influence this reasoning face a considerable challenge in penetrating these layers of bias. However, the persuasion scholarship indicates that an individual’s reasoning can be influenced by strong and credible counterevidence (Festinger 1957), particularly when this raises doubt and anxiety, which will cause even committed or partisan voters to reconsider their decisions (Stevens et al. 2008).

More recent research by Westen et al. (2006) used functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI) technology to show that when partisans were presented with information threatening their beliefs about their preferred candidate or an opposition candidate, they reached biased conclusions. The fMRI analysis reflected their effort to reach an “emotionally stable judgement” through confirmation bias which was primarily involved with the part of the brain associated with processing emotions. This insight supports other recent theoretical work on affective components in political choice (Brader 2006; Marcus, Neuman, and MacKuen 2000).

Stevens et al. (2008) argue that partisans usually consider attacks on an opponent by their candidate as expected and confirmatory, thus they are less likely to scrutinize these attack ads closely. However, criticisms of a partisan’s own candidate can prompt two very different responses. On the one hand, it can be viewed as routine and expected and is therefore rejected with the partisan acting in the normal ‘motivated’ way. But if the criticism of the partisan’s candidate arouses an emotional response such as anxiety, because the criticism is seen as fair and legitimate, or because the opponents rhetoric is seen as particularly unfair, then there is a dramatically different response. Neuman et al. (1997, p. 8) state that “When the threat/surveillance response is activated we find a close and demonstrable link to higher levels of active calculation, the questioning of existing behavioural patterns.” This conclusion prompted Stevens et al. (2008, p. 529) to pose the question “How might motivated information processing affect partisan responses to negative advertising?” They hypothesize that partisans will vary in their reactions in distinct and predictable ways depending on whether a partisan’s own candidate is targeted and whether the claims are seen as fair or not. Their conclusions are interesting in that they found that partisanship does shape responses to negative advertising. Also, partisans are motivated processors of information and respond habitually according to their partisan bias. Partisans are predisposed to see charges against their favoured candidates as unfounded, and when confronted with such charges they put up counter arguments and vote as expected. However, and importantly, if they consider a charge against their candidate as potentially fair, partisans will question their existing voting habits, activating doubt and anxiety about their

preferred candidate. This can result in voting for the opposition candidate or possibly more likely the partisan not voting. Stevens et al. (2008, p. 540) conclude that “Understanding why partisans sometimes do not reject information at odds with their beliefs will undoubtedly illuminate the more usual response of rejecting aversive information in processes leading to confirmation bias”.

Arcuri et al. (2008) support Stevens et al. (2008) in calling for greater attention to be devoted to the affective responses, particularly amongst partisans. On the basis of previous research, Arcuri et al. (2008, p. 372) conclude that “... if the emotions elicited by the new information are coherent with previous evaluations stored in memory and automatically activated, the new information is acquired, accepted and stored. In contrast, new information that contradicts current spontaneous evaluation is denied, challenged, or simply ignored.” Importantly for partisans, research has demonstrated that activation of consistent responses and the inhibition of inconsistent responses were more powerful for participants with more polarised attitudes and with more sophisticated political ideas (Burdein, Lodge, and Taber 2006; Louro, Pieters, and Zeelenberg 2005). Whilst the focus of the Arcuri et al. (2008) research was around exploring the “hot” cognition concept, they investigated “decided” or partisan voters as part of their sample and their results are supportive of previous arguments identified above. They conclude that voters are not passive recipients of information, but are actively involved in information selection and processing, including interpretation and counter arguing (Meffert et al. 2006; Taber and Lodge 2006). Also, voters’ prior implicit preferences powerfully constrain the selection, encoding and evaluation of new information (Taber and Lodge 2006). Thus, selected information is transformed and remembered according to the voter’s motivations and pre-existing preferences. Therefore partisans can become more polarised and biased in their information reasoning, unless, as Stevens et al. (2008) suggest, anxiety can be raised in a partisan’s mind, which can then influence their information interpretation and voting choice. Thus, linking these partisan studies with the previous negative advertising research of, for example, Robideaux (2002), Pinkleton, Vm and Austin (2002), it can be seen that both the affective and

cognitive responses of partisans to negative advertising requires further research and to this end, the following hypotheses are proposed:

***H5:** Affective evaluations of image-attack ad will be significantly more negative than cognitive evaluations.*

***H6:** Affective evaluations of issue-attack ad will be significantly more negative than cognitive evaluations.*

***H7:** Overall, the attitude towards the image-attack ad will be significantly more negative than towards the issue-attack ad.*

***H8:** All three partisan groups will be significantly more negative towards image-attack advertising than issue-attack advertising.*

***H9:** All three partisan groups will find image-attack less acceptable than issue-attack advertising.*

## **METHOD**

### **Procedure and Sample**

The study was conducted during the three week period immediately following the British general election held in May 2005. A quasi-random sampling approach was used to conduct a national survey in England using an interviewer-administered questionnaire. Doctoral students were recruited as interviewers for the research. A fee of \$3 (£2) was paid for each completed questionnaire. A briefing pack was sent to individual interviewers, containing full instructions, FAQs and troubleshooting solutions, A4 laminated copies of the two ads, scale cards, identity badge and the questionnaires. Any questions that arose during the data collection were dealt with by email or the telephone. 1,500 questionnaires were distributed and 1,134 usable questionnaires were returned.

The questionnaire was fully piloted and revised prior to the survey commencing. Filter questions were used to ensure that only those respondents who were British citizens aged between 18-22 years old, thus eligible to vote for the first time, were interviewed. Whilst a number of political

parties participated in the May 2005 British general election, this study is only concerned with those respondents who identified themselves as partisans of the three main political parties, namely, Conservative, Labour and LibDem.

From the total of 1,134 respondents to the questionnaire, initial analysis identified 627 partisans, of which Conservatives were 170 (27%), Labour 257 (41%) and LibDem 200 (32%). The average age of the respondents is 20.56 years, with men accounting for 51% and women 49%. Of the 627 partisans, 59% were students, 36% were in employment and 5% neither working nor a student. This suggests a higher proportion of students within the sample, which may be expected given the interviewers were doctoral students. The geographical dispersion of the respondents was 51% coming from the South East (including London), 13% from the South West, 24% from the Midlands and 13% from the North. Compared to the population dispersal in England, our youth sample is slightly biased towards the South.

### **Stimulus Attack Ads**

The overall ad campaigns of the two main parties were adjudged by both political commentators and the electorate to have been attacking in tone (Dermody and Hanmer-Lloyd 2005). Two poster ads were selected from these campaigns and were used as stimuli in the research. Permission was sought and given by the two main political parties to reproduce their posters for our research purposes. The Conservative sponsored poster was an image-attack ad that showed a picture of Prime Minister Tony Blair's face with the message "If he's prepared to lie to take us to war he's prepared to lie to win an election" in bold capital letters in black against a red (Labour) background (Appendix 1, hereafter referred to as Ad1). Underneath, in smaller writing, it stated "If you value the truth, vote for it" with an X next to the word Conservative (i.e. vote Conservative). The second ad was sponsored by Labour and showed the head and shoulders of a nurse against a hospital background with the message "If you value it, vote for it" in large capital letters. Underneath, in smaller type, a statement read "A free and fair NHS or Tory (Conservative) charges for hospital operations. Vote Labour" (Appendix 2,

hereafter referred to as Ad2). Ad2 is an example of an issue-attack ad giving a policy issue warning to the electorate that the Conservative Party, if elected, intended to ‘privatise’ the free NHS.

## Measures

The ad evaluations were assessed with eleven 5-point bipolar adjective pairs. The items for the cognitive ad evaluation are developed from Robideaux’s studies (Robideaux 1998, 2002, 2004) and for the affective ad evaluation from Hill (1989) and Tinkham and Weaver-Lariscy (1994). In addition to these questions and the voting behavior of the respondents, other questions, which are not specifically hypothesized in this paper, were measured. Prior to the examination of the hypotheses, principal components analysis (PCA) with Varimax rotation was performed on the 11-attitude items for each advertisement to reduce the data set for further analysis. Both the Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin tests of sampling adequacy exceeded the recommended value of .6, i.e. Ad1=.925 and Ad2=.892 (Kaiser 1970, 1974) and Bartlett’s Tests of Sphericity (Bartlett 1954) were statistically significant ( $p=.000$ ). These tests produced satisfactory results indicating that the data were appropriate for PCA. The analysis yielded a clear two-factor solution based on Eigenvalues greater than one for both advertisements (see Table 1 and 2). The two factors were ‘Cognitive Ad Evaluation’ (explaining 34.41% of the variance in Ad1 and 32.19% in Ad2) and ‘Affective Ad Evaluation’ (explaining 31.63% in Ad1 and 30.04% in Ad2) and confirmed the constructs as identified in the literature. The two-factor solutions explained 66.03% of the total variance for Ad1 and 62.22% for Ad2 respectively. However, the item ‘interesting’ was cross-loading on the affective component in Ad1 (as in studies by Hill 1989; Mitchell and Olson 1981) and on the cognitive component in Ad2 (as in the studies by Robideaux 2002, 2004). In order to be able to compare the attitudes between the two advertisements, it was decided to delete this item from further analysis.

The multi-item scales combining the appropriate indicators for each of the cognitive and affective Ad evaluations demonstrated very good internal consistency for both advertisements, with coefficient alphas exceeding .8. For ease of interpretation and to be consistent with previous research



(e.g. Mitchell and Olson 1981; Robideaux 2002), construct means were computed for each of the two factors for both ads. The means and standard deviations, as well as the coefficient alphas for these factors are shown in Tables 1 and 2.

**Place Table 1 & 2 about here**

## **RESULTS**

### **Partisanship and Attitude towards the Ads**

To test hypotheses H1 to H4, a one-way between-groups multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) was applied to examine partisan differences in attitudes towards the two advertisements. For each ad, the cognitive and affective Ad evaluation factors were used as dependent variables with partisanship as the independent variable (3 between-groups categories).

Results of MANOVA indicated that the interaction between partisanship and the attitudes towards the two types of Ads is significant (Ad1:  $F(4,1248)=19.109, p<.001$ , Pillai's trace=.115; Ad2:  $F(4,1248)=21.451, p<.001$ , Pillai's trace=.129). When the results for the independent variables were examined individually, a statistical significance was found for all four of the dependent variables (see Table 3 for MANOVA analysis summary and Figure 1 for the comparison of the mean scores for both advertisements).

**Place Table 3 about here**

**Place Figure 1 about here**

An inspection of the mean scores and the results of the Bonferroni's post-hoc test showed that for Ad1 (image-attack by Conservative Party against Tony Blair), Conservative partisans are significantly more positive than Labour partisans as indicated by their lower mean scores on both the cognitive and affective attitude factors ( $M=2.65$  and  $M=3.31$  respectively,  $p<.001$ ). As expected, the Labour partisans have significantly more negative attitudes towards Ad1, as it is attacking the leader of their party ( $M=3.42$  (cognitive) and  $M=3.83$  (affective),  $p<.001$ ). Thus Hypothesis 1 is confirmed.

Hypothesis 2, in relation to Ad2 (i.e. issue-attack by Labour against Conservatives), is also supported by our results. The Labour partisans have a significantly more positive attitude towards Ad2 in both the cognitive and affective factors than the Conservative partisans (Labour:  $M=2.33$  and  $M=2.36$ ; Conservative:  $M=2.97$  and  $M=2.74$ , respectively; Bonferroni,  $p<.001$ ). However, it is interesting to note that the mean score difference between the two parties is not as big as it is for Ad1. This suggests that attitudes were stronger for the image-attack than for the issue-attack ad.

Hypothesis 3 is also supported. There is a significant difference between LibDem voters and Conservative partisans (Bonferroni,  $p<.001$ ). LibDem partisans are significantly more negative than Conservative partisans towards Ad1. This is indicated by their higher mean scores on the cognitive and affective attitude factors for Ad1 (LibDem:  $M=3.21$  and  $M=3.57$  respectively; Conservative:  $M=2.65$  and  $M=3.31$  respectively). Overall, the results showed that the LibDem partisans are closer to the Labour partisans in their attitude towards Ad1, than to the Conservative partisans. However, when Bonferroni's post hoc test was applied to these means, it was found that this difference was still significant ( $p<.001$ ).

Hypothesis 4 examines the attitudes of the Labour partisans towards Ad2 compared to the Conservative and LibDem partisans. The MANOVA results indicate that the mean score for the LibDem's attitudes towards Ad2 is significantly higher and shows more negative attitudes than the Labour partisans (LibDem:  $M=2.83$  (cognitive) and  $M=2.61$  (affective); Labour:  $M=2.33$  and  $M=2.36$  respectively, Bonferroni,  $p<.001$ ). Therefore, this hypothesis is supported. Furthermore, the results show that there is no significant difference in the mean scores of attitudes between the LibDem voters and the Conservative partisans (Bonferroni,  $p>.05$ ). Thus, the LibDem and Conservative partisans are equally negative towards the Labour issue-attack against the Conservatives.

Hypothesis 5 and 6 proposed that affective evaluations are more negative than cognitive evaluations for Ad1 and Ad2. The results of the paired samples t-test confirmed hypothesis 5. The overall mean score of affective evaluations for Ad1 (the image-attack ad) for all voters is significantly higher and thus more negative than the cognitive evaluations ( $M=3.61$  and  $M=3.15$  respectively,  $t=-$

16.264,  $df=626$ ,  $p<.001$ ). For Ad2 (the issue-attack ad.) the overall mean score for affective evaluations for all voters was significantly lower and thus more positive ( $M=2.55$ ,  $t=4.608$ ,  $df=626$ ,  $p<.001$ ) than the mean score for cognitive evaluations which was 2.66. Consequently H6 is not supported.

Hypothesis 7 examines in more detail the differences between attitudes towards image-attack and issue-attack advertising. A paired-samples t-test, including all voters as one group, indicates significant differences between the attitudes towards Ad1 and Ad2 ( $t=23.74$ ,  $df=626$ ,  $p<.001$  for the affective factors;  $t=9.60$ ,  $df=626$ ,  $p<.001$  for the cognitive factors). Table 4 shows that the mean scores for the cognitive and affective factors are significantly higher, thus indicating a more negative attitude to Ad1 than for Ad2. This supports hypothesis 7, the image-attack ad engendered a far more negative response from the partisans than for the issue-attack ad.

**Place Table 4 about here**

To examine in more detail whether this differs across the three partisan groups, a mixed between-within subjects ANOVA was applied to compare the attitude scores for the cognitive and affective factors between Ad1 and Ad2 for each partisan group. The results indicate a statistically significant interaction effect between the partisan groups and the two types of ads on the cognitive evaluation factor (Wilks' Lambda=.793,  $F(2,624)=81.294$ ,  $p<.001$ ) and the affective evaluation factor (Wilks' Lambda=.891,  $F(2,624)=38.224$ ,  $p<.001$ ). The main effect of the type of ad is significant for both cognitive (Wilks' Lambda=.897,  $F(1,624)=71.666$ ,  $p<.001$ ) and affective evaluations (Wilks' Lambda=.535,  $F(1,624)=542.025$ ,  $p<.001$ ).

**Place Figure 2 about here**

As can be seen from Figure 2, the means for the affective factors are much higher and thus significantly more negative for each partisan group. For the affective factors, the mean scores range from 3.31 to 3.83 for Ad1, whilst for Ad2 the mean scores range between 2.36 and 2.74. For the cognitive evaluation, the mean scores are higher and thus more negative for Ad1 than for Ad2, for

Labour and LibDem partisans only, not for the Conservative partisans. Thus, we can conclude that the significant main effect of the types of ads in relation to cognitive evaluations is solely attributable to Labour and LibDem partisans as they evaluate Ad1 as more negative than Conservative voters. For the Conservative voters, the mean score on the cognitive factor was lower and thus more positive for Ad1 than for Ad2. This is not surprising as Ad1 was the ad of the Conservative party attacking a Labour leader. Therefore it is reasonable to conclude that Conservative voters found this ad more believable, informative, trustworthy, honest and helpful than Ad2, which was the Labour ad attacking Conservative health policy. It can also be concluded that all three partisan groups rate Ad1 as significantly more negative on the affective factors, but not on the cognitive factors, where the Conservative partisans rate Ad2 as more negative than Ad1. Therefore, hypothesis 8 is only partially supported.

### **Acceptability of Attack Ads**

Hypothesis 9 is supported. Overall 58.1% of all partisans found the image-attack ad unacceptable, whilst only 41.9% of partisans found it acceptable. With regards to the issue-attack ad, 90.5% of partisans found it acceptable whereas only 9.5% of partisans considered it unacceptable. Chi-Square tests were conducted to examine the difference between the three main partisan groups' acceptability regarding each attack ad and significant differences were found (Chi-Square=59.009,  $df=2$ ,  $p<.001$  for Ad1; Chi-Square=7.596,  $df=2$ ,  $p=.022$  for Ad2). It was noted that a statistically significant proportion of all Conservative voters find the image-attack ad more acceptable than Labour or LibDem voters (67.5% versus 31% and 33.1% respectively). For the issue-attack ad, the LibDem partisans find it significantly more unacceptable in contrast to the Labour and Conservative voters (13.9% versus 6.1% and 9.6% respectively).

## **DISCUSSION**

Previous research on partisan attitudes to advertising is fairly consistent in suggesting that partisan bias exists and that partisans, via ‘motivated reasoning’, prejudice their information processing in a selective way to maintain “an illusion of objectivity” or to reach an “emotionally stable judgement” (An 2002; Ansolabehere and Iyengar 1995; Bothwell and Brigham 1983; Chang 2003; Goren 2002; Stevens et al. 2008; Westen et al. 2006). This study supports this scholarship insofar as voters’ party orientations determined their responses to the messages contained in the attack ads used during the 2005 British general election. Thus, Conservative partisans have significantly more positive attitudes to their image-attack ad accusing the Labour leader of being a liar, than the Labour partisans. Similarly, Labour partisans have significantly more positive attitudes to their issue-attack ad suggesting the Conservative’s would start charging for the ‘free NHS’, than the Conservative partisans. Accordingly, with reference to social identity theory, and particularly in/out groups, young partisans strive – via ‘motivated reasoning’ – to align their party political identity with the ad messages of *their* respective party.

With respect to third party partisans, namely the LibDem partisans, the results from our study show that their attitudes to the attack ads essentially coincide with the partisans of the party under attack. Thus, they responded similarly to the Labour partisans when considering the Conservative’s image-attack ad and likewise with the Conservative partisans when considering the Labour’s issue-attack ad. Their responses may reflect the culture of the LibDem party, whose campaign, in contrast to Labour’s and the Conservative’s, was characterised by a more positive collection of ad messages, accompanied by a smaller proportion of negative comparative ad messages (Dermody and Hanmer-Lloyd 2005). Reflecting on the culture of the LibDems, it is worth noting that they gained creditable success with the youth vote in this election and this was achieved through positive support for their perceived fair policies, for example no University tuition fees (Egan 2005). This is in line with later American research which, unlike the earlier research, suggests that support of the third party is due to policy support rather than cynicism with the other two main parties (Koch 2003). Consequently, within the norms of this culture, the young LibDem partisans would find it troublesome to condone

attacks from any other party, regardless of their own political identity and hence allegiance. Our third-party effect, however, may not be universal, but dependant on the ethos of the third party and its partisans – in other words these third party partisans may not always side with the party under attack. Equally it might also be the case that these LibDem voters would reject any messages, regardless of genre, except those from their own party, which, in itself supports ‘motivated reasoning’. Given the paucity of research evidence on third party effects in relation to negative advertising (Skaperdas and Grofman 1995), our study makes an important and enlarged contribution to this issue because it goes beyond negative advertising to examine third party young partisan responses to the image and issue-attack advertising used by the two main challenging parties. Such third party voter responses to attack advertising have not been reported elsewhere; hence further research is needed to advance understanding of this effect.

In terms of overall attitudes to attack ads, this study supports existing research indicating responses to image-attack ads are more negative compared with issue-attack ads (Meirick 2002; Pinkleton, Vm, and Austin 2002; Robideaux 1998, 2002, 2004). The results clearly show that young partisans have significantly more negative attitudes to the image-attack ad, where the Labour leader is accused of being a liar, than the issue-attack ad concerning the future of the NHS in Conservative hands. As previous studies have suggested, it may well be that our young partisans consider image-attack ads to be unfair and hence unethical, and unhelpful as a decision-making aid. If this is the case then this calls into question arguments purporting that negative advertising works by being cognitively engaging. For our young partisans, it would seem that while they do not necessarily use the language of ethicality, they have reservations about the value of image-attack ads particularly. Consequently, even given their party loyalty, they may be left feeling uncomfortable with the use of this malevolent and rather ‘cognitively empty’ genre of election advertising.

Furthermore, in relation to the acceptability of image and issue-attack advertising, previous research has concluded that issue-attack advertising is deemed to be more acceptable and image-attack is largely unacceptable (Brooks 2006; Dermody et al. 2013; Kates 1998; Meirick 2002;

Pinkleton, Vm, and Austin 2002; Robideaux 1998, 2002, 2004; Stevens et al. 2008). Our research supports these findings, with over 90% of our young partisans finding ads that attack issues as acceptable, whereas nearly 60% of young partisans find ads that attack the politician personally (Blair as a liar) unacceptable. While we might have expected this level of unacceptability to be higher, it is largely explained by 68% of young Conservative partisans, from the party who sponsored the ad, finding the ad acceptable. While this might appear to be an attitudinal paradox, given that our young partisans' attitudes generally are highly disparaging towards the use of image- attack advertising, it would appear that for some – in our case the young Conservative partisans – this does not apply to their own party. Concurring with the work of Stevens et al. (2008), this certainly supports the idea of 'motivated reasoning' by the young Conservative partisans as they show in-group biases (Duck, Terry, and Hogg 1998; Elder, Douglas, and Sutton 2006; Greene 2004; Kelly 1988) in their judgements and impact assessment of the Blair as a liar ad. Thus, it may be that we are witnessing the interplay of young Conservative partisans' explicit and implicit attitudes; whereby they specifically judge an image-attack ad like Blair as a liar as acceptable because they believe he is a 'warmonger', but broadly reject the use of image-attack ads in election campaigning, particularly by opposing parties against their own party candidates.

When considering the affective and cognitive responses by the partisans to the image and issue-attack ads, a number of findings are of interest. In terms of the affective response to the image-attack ad, previous research (Pinkleton, Vm, and Austin 2002; Robideaux 1998, 2002, 2004) generally concludes that respondents have a strong negative attitudinal response. This study supports these findings. The affective response to the issue-attack ad is expected to be different to the image-attack ad and, indeed, this is the case in our study. Thus, young partisans, whilst finding image-attack ads unacceptable and holding strongly negative affective attitudes towards them, view issue-attack ads far more positively.

In relation to the cognitive response to the image and issue-attack ads, the young partisans were more mixed in their response. For the issue-attack ad, the Labour young partisans (whose party

sponsored the ad) were significantly more positive than both the Conservative young partisans (party under attack) and the LibDem young partisans, who both remained fairly neutral in their attitudes. However, when considering the cognitive response to the image-attack ad, both the Labour young partisans (party under attack) and the third party (LibDem) young partisans were strongly negative in their attitudes. This suggests both sets of young partisans found the ad to be uninformative, unbelievable, untrustworthy, dishonest, and unhelpful. The Conservative young partisans, on the other hand, had overall positive attitudes towards the ad, in stark contrast to the two other partisan groups. This concurs with the findings of Robideaux (1998, p.7) when he states "...while negative ads are associated with negative attitude-affects towards those ads, they are also associated with a higher, more positive degree of cognition credibility". In line with other researchers, the higher cognitive dimension of attack advertising found in our study may be partly due to the degree of cynicism towards politicians (Merritt 1984), or at least the cynicism of younger voters – the focus of this research (Yoon 1995). With increasing levels of political cynicism among youth, it may well be, as Robideaux (1998) observes, they are more disposed to believe the bad, whilst being mistrustful about the good. In contrast to this viewpoint, Robideaux (2004, p. 222) reported on a later study which found "...a shift from positive to negative on the cognitive construct for negative advertisements may be the most important change". This change was accounted for by females going more negative, whilst males remained positive. However, in this study there were no gender differences amongst partisans. Nevertheless, it was clear that while both the partisans under attack and the third party partisans had strong negative responses to the cognitive construct for Ad1, the Conservative partisans had a positive response. This confirms support for the 'motivated reasoning' of information and suggests that the role of image-attack advertising may be most useful in convincing existing voters to stay loyal (Fletcher 2001). Other impacts of negative advertising, such as swaying undecided voters, backlash, source derogation and sleeper effects were not the subject of this study. It is the case, however, that the leadership of Tony Blair proved to be problematic for the Labour party over the following years and a number of commentators both for and against the Labour party identified his



leadership image, especially around the Iraq War, as being instrumental in Labour losing the 2010 election, even though a new leader had taken over (Dermody and Hanmer-Lloyd 2011; Kavannagh and Cowley 2010).

## CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

In this article we have aimed to respond to Henneberg's (2008) call to advance understanding and expand conceptual horizons on the impacts of negative advertising on voter decision-making, through rigorous research investigation. Accordingly, in this paper we have contributed to knowledge on young British partisans' attitudes to issue and image-attack advertising.

Our study confirms that young partisans are not passive recipients of information, but are actively involved in information selection and processing, including interpretation and counter arguing. Thus, young partisans' prior preferences powerfully constrain the selection, encoding and evaluation of new information. In this way the social integrity of the in-group is protected. Therefore, election campaign strategists need to be aware of, and understand how young voters – as partisans – are biased in their processing of negative attack messages. In particular, they need to consider how their 'motivated reasoning' influences young partisans message 'take-out'. Further research is needed to understand not only the foundations of their bias, but also its effects on their ad and broader message evaluations, and how this, in turn, influences their decision-making in relation to electoral participation.

Young British partisans are much more negative towards image-attack ads than issue-attack ads and generally find them unacceptable. A potential inconsistency might appear to exist, however, in the attitudes of the young Conservative partisans who found the image-attack ad portraying Blair as a liar more acceptable than the Labour/LibDem partisans. Given our findings, we may be seeing the effect of cognition credibility here, with their reasoning bias embedded in implicit and explicit attitudes; whereon young Conservative partisans strictly accept all Conservative messages as the in group (in contradiction of their broader attitudes on image-attack ads). The main value of image-

attack ads for the sponsoring party would therefore appear to be to provide additional arguments for partisans to remain loyal through denigrating their opponents. This seems to operate more powerfully at the cognitive level. While this adds some credence to the argument that negative advertising ‘works’ in election campaigning; the use of attack advertising, specifically image-attack ads, carries a ‘health warning’ that should not be ignored, (which we highlight below). Election campaign strategists should thus proceed with caution. Continuing research is required in different contexts to help explain the impact of different forms of negative attack advertising and the processes that young partisans use in evaluating it.

This study contributes to understanding of third party effects, where currently there is little research evidence. While our research suggests that third party young partisans generally respond to negative attack advertising in a similar way to the partisans under attack, further research is needed to explore how universal this third-party effect is, or if it is very much determined by the political values of a third party and its partisans – in which case third party effects will be variable. Reflecting on the opening Labour-Conservative battle and the late-starter LibDem challenge in the 2010 British general election and the formation of the first coalition Conservative-LibDem British government, it may well be that 3 (or more) main party campaigns become the norm in Britain in the future. If this is the case election campaign strategists will need to reconsider their two-party campaign strategies and tactics. Further research will be beneficial in assisting with this evolution.

Finally, ‘a health warning’; given the apparent limited support for image-attack advertising coupled with previous evidence on its effects on youth political attitudes and engagement, its use in elections should be questioned. This warning is magnified when considering the fragility of the youth vote and the norm of non-voting rather than voting. This is where campaign strategists, and indeed political leaders, need to consider the role of their election advertising and how far they are prepared to go to win the election. Consequently, while it might be of some value to their own young partisans in sustaining their loyalty (albeit perhaps only on issues that might be highly believable), more broadly image-attack advertising serves to reinforce existing youth cynicism regarding the

reputational deficiencies of politicians and thus, potentially it shrinks the youth vote. Campaign reform, however, is not on the agenda. Thus, just as President Obama promised no negative campaigning after the 2008 Presidential election and used it extensively in 2012, attack advertising reform appears to be like the weather, as Mark Twain observed, everybody talks about it, but nobody ever does anything about it.

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